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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether preadolescents (fifth and sixth graders) perceived the same effects of parents' job stress as suggested by parent reports. Participating were 53 dual-earner families and 28 single-mother families in which all parents were employed at least part-time. Families were mostly European-American, middle-class, highly educated; some had very high incomes. Data were collected 4 or 5 times daily for 5 consecutive days (Monday through Friday). Before leaving the workplace, parents rated their feelings during interactions with coworkers and supervisors that day. Ratings of seven negative adjectives were combined to create the measure of job stress. Before going to bed, parents and children rated their interaction with one another that evening. Results indicated that fathers reported that they were less responsive with children after days with more job stress. Children's descriptions of father's behavior supported this finding. Fathers reported that they were more irritable with children after days with more social stress. But children did not notice this change in the fathers' behavior on those evenings. Both groups of mothers reported that they were more responsive with their children after stressful work days. Children's descriptions of mothers' behavior supported this finding. The data support the view that fathers used social withdrawal to cope with social stressors at work, but mothers did not. Mothers may have used family life to compensate for stressful work days. There was some evidence of a negative emotion spillover effect among fathers, but data from children did not support fathers' reports. (Contains six references.) (KB)

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The Effects of Daily Job Stress on Parent Behavior with Preadolescents

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Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development
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Chronic daily stressors can have an insidious impact on family life. It may be difficult for parents and children to notice how stressful events that take place outside of the home gradually come to shape family social interactions (Repetti & Wood, in press). (OVERHEAD #1) I have tried to study this process by examining the way that common stressful events during a parent's day at work and a child's day at school come to shape patterns of social interaction when the family reunites at the end of the day (Repetti, 1989; Repetti, 1996). I am interested in learning how changes in a family member's behavior from one day to the next may be explained by the type and amount of daily stress that the individual was exposed to earlier in the day. Today I will only discuss the effects of job stressors on parent behavior with children. And, I will focus on one particular type of stressor: negative social interactions with coworkers and supervisors. If time permits, I would be happy to discuss my findings regarding the effects of work overload, another common job stressor.

I have published two studies that tested the effects of social stressors at work on parents' behavior with their children. The hypotheses that I will be discussing today are based on the findings from these two studies. (OVERHEAD #2) In a study of male air traffic controllers (ATCs), I found that after days at work in which the ATCs reported more unpleasant social interactions, their self-reported behavior with their children, who were between 4 and 10 years old, changed in two ways (Repetti, 1994). First, they described themselves as engaging in fewer high involvement behaviors, such as helping with homework. I have labelled this a *social withdrawal* response to job stress and have suggested that it reflects a strategy used by adults to cope, in the short run, with cognitive and emotional overloads associated with certain types of stressors. The use of a social withdrawal coping response on any given day should result in a decrease in parent responsiveness. Compared to other days, the parent would appear less affectionate, less playful, and less involved.

At the same time that they seemed to be more withdrawn after high social stress days, the ATC fathers also reported using more discipline with their children and they described a generally more negative emotional tone to parent-child interactions. I interpreted this response as a *negative emotion spillover effect*. This term is commonly used in the work-family literature to refer to a process whereby feelings of frustration, anger, or disappointment at work lead to the expression of greater irritability and impatience or more

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power assertion at home.

More recently, I studied mother-preschooler dyads (Repetti & Wood, 1997). In addition to mothers' reports of daily parent-child interaction, I videotaped parent-child reunions at the end of the mother's workday at a worksite daycare center. I found that both mothers and independent observers described mothers as more behaviorally and emotionally withdrawn (e.g., less speaking and fewer expressions of affection) on days when the mothers reported more negative social interactions at work. I did not find any evidence of a negative emotion spillover effect in the total sample of mothers.

In the study that I will discuss today, I wanted to investigate whether children perceive the same effects of job stress as those suggested by the parents' reports. The sample for the current study was composed of two types of families. (OVERHEAD #3) We had 53 dual-earner families, in which both parents worked at least part-time, and 28 single-mother families, in which the mother was employed at least part-time. In all of these families there was a preadolescent target child, in the fifth or sixth grade, who reported on daily parent-child interactions. This is a sample of mostly European-American, middle-class families. Some of the families enjoy a very high income, many of the parents are professionals and most are highly educated. The families in this study were drawn from a larger, longitudinal study, but I will not be discussing any of the longitudinal data today. I will focus exclusively on the daily-report data.

Parents and children completed daily-reports 4 or 5 times each day for 5 consecutive days (Monday through Friday). (OVERHEAD #4) Each afternoon, before leaving the workplace to return home, parents described how they felt during interactions with coworkers and with supervisors that day. Their ratings of 7 negative adjectives (like tense, resentful, annoyed) were combined to create one measure of negative social interactions at work. This is the job stress predictor variable in the analyses I will present here today. It is based on the same job stress measure that I used in the other studies that I just mentioned.

Each night, before going to bed, parents and children described their interactions with each other that evening. (OVERHEAD #5) To test the social withdrawal hypothesis, I embedded items to assess parent responsiveness. The parents rated 17 items and the children rated 19 parent responsiveness items. As you can see, the scales were designed to contain comparable sets of items. They asked how interested, involved, affectionate, and friendly the parent was that evening. To test for a negative spillover effect, parents and children also described the amount of aversive behavior that the parent engaged in each evening. (OVERHEAD #6) These items assess the parent's expression of anger and disapproval, and his/her use of punishment that evening. I want to point out here that the target child in the two-parent families rated only one parent, and each child rated the same parent on all five nights.

I am not going to go into detail about the method of analysis that I used to test the

hypotheses (although I would be happy to do so in the question-answer period). (See Repetti & Wood, 1997 for details about the WLS multiple regression model). Suffice it to say here that I used a weighted-least squares regression model, in which the predictor variable was the measure of negative social interactions at work on a given day and the outcome variable was a rating of the parent's behavior that evening. The regression model is designed to test day-to-day fluctuations in parenting behavior and job stress, that is, changes from the parent's or the dyad's own baseline level. (OVERHEAD #7) As shown on the overhead, I am interested here, not in the fact that Person A and Person B tend to differ in their average levels of a particular behavior say, for example, responsiveness with their children. I am interested in how each individual deviates from his/her own baseline level from one day to the next. In the regressions that I am about to present, daily fluctuations like these in negative social interactions at work are used to predict daily fluctuations in parenting behaviors.

First, I tested the social withdrawal hypothesis with ratings of daily father behavior in dual-earner families. (OVERHEAD #8) Fathers reported that they were less responsive with the preadolescent target child after days at work in which the father had described more negative social interactions with coworkers and supervisors. More important, the children's descriptions of the fathers' behavior supported this finding. Preadolescents also described their fathers as less involved and responsive at home on days when the fathers had earlier reported more unpleasant social interactions at work. This is strong support for the idea that fathers use social withdrawal as a way of coping with social stressors at work. The children's data offer particularly convincing evidence because the children had no idea what their fathers had indicated about their experiences with coworkers and supervisors on forms that they had completed earlier in the day at work.

Next, I tested the negative emotion spillover hypothesis within the same sample. As you can see, there was a significant positive association between the job stress variable and the fathers' ratings of aversive parent behavior. Fathers reported that they were more irritable with the preadolescent target child after days in which they described more social stress at work. However, the children apparently did not notice this change in the fathers' behavior on those evenings. There was no association between the fathers' ratings of job stress and the children's reports of paternal aversive behavior.

This inconsistency is interesting. For the most part, in the work-family literature, negative spillover effects are found with self-report data (i.e., when the same person is reporting both experiences at work and behavior at home). In the study in which we videotaped mothers' reunions with their preschoolers, the coders actually noted *less* maternal impatience on days when the mothers described more negative social interactions at work (Repetti & Wood, 1997). It seems possible that the mood spillover effect may, at least in part, reflect an information processing bias whereby the effect of the negative mood that is generated at work is to color perceptions of subsequent social interactions at home, but perhaps not have as strong an effect on actual behavior. The failure of the children's ratings to support the fathers' reports of negative spillover lends some credence to this notion.

Finally, I tested the social withdrawal hypothesis for mothers. (OVERHEAD #9) When I looked at the self-reported behavior of mothers in dual-earner families and single-parent mothers, the results were surprising. Both groups of mothers reported that they were more responsive with the preadolescent target child after days at work in which they described higher levels of stress. More important, the children's descriptions of the mothers' behavior supported this finding. In single-mother households, preadolescents described their mothers as more involved and responsive on days when the mothers had earlier reported more unpleasant social interactions at work. Most of the children in dual-earner families were assigned to rate their fathers as the target parent in the home. (This was because I was aiming for an equal number of child ratings of target mothers and target fathers across the entire sample of families and there were very few single-father households in our sample.) As a result, there was only a small sample of children in dual-earner households who rated daily maternal behavior. Unfortunately, it was too small a sample to analyze as a separate group. However, when I combined the child ratings from the dual-earner and single-mother households, the findings were only stronger.

Thus, there was no support for the idea that these mothers used social withdrawal as a way of coping with social stressors at work. The data from both groups of mothers and independent ratings from their children suggested that mothers increased their level of interest, affection, playfulness, and involvement with their preadolescent children after days when they had experienced more job stress. I want to emphasize that this does not look like a fluke in the data. The same effect is observed using dual-earner mothers' self-reports, single-parent mothers' self-reports, and using the descriptions of maternal behavior provided by the children.

I'd like you to consider the possibility that we are seeing here a group of mothers who are in a position to most benefit from the experience of occupying multiple social roles. I am suggesting that these women may be able to use their family life to "compensate" for a bad day at work. We know that occupying multiple social roles can be beneficial to women's mental and physical health (Repetti, in press). Perhaps this pattern of results is demonstrating one of the benefits of multiple roles "in action." Having children or occupying the role of "parent" may buffer at least some women from certain job stressors, and this result may suggest how this happens. In other words, increased positive involvement with children may reflect a coping process, one that can buffer parents from some of the ill-effects of job stressors.

Of course the pattern of results that I obtained here raises important questions. First, why did I observe an effect (increased responsiveness) that is the opposite of the social withdrawal response that I found in the study in which I videotaped daily mother-child reunions (Repetti & Wood, 1997)? Let me point out that the two samples of mothers differ in two important ways: (1) the age of the target child (preschoolers in the daycare study versus preadolescents in this study), and (2) the SES of the mothers (in the daycare study the mothers who were videotaped had much lower incomes than the mothers in this sample and

the majority were ethnic minority single parents). It may be that the high income of the mothers in this study, combined with the older ages of their children, translates into fewer chores and other pressing demands on their time at home in the evening. This would give employed mothers the freedom to indulge themselves through enjoyable and more intense interactions with their children when they have had a difficult day at work. Problems with supervisors or others at work might not seem so important, or at least can be put aside for a short time while they immerse themselves in the joys of motherhood.

This raises an obvious question about the striking difference between mothers' and fathers' behavioral responses to more negative social interactions at work. The mothers became more responsive and the fathers became more withdrawn. (Recall, the dual-earner mothers and fathers in this study were in the same families.) This is not a self-presentational difference between men and women; the children's descriptions of parent behavior were in accord with the parents' reports. The children who rated fathers described them as less responsive and the children who rated mothers described them as more responsive on days when the parent had earlier described more negative social interactions at work. (Note, however, that there were no mean differences in overall levels of maternal and paternal responsiveness as rated by parents and children.) There are probably many differences between mothers and fathers of preadolescents that might account for the different results. One possibility is that the self-identities of the men in this middle and upper-middle-class sample were much more tied up with their occupations or careers than was the case for the women. For example, the fathers were all employed full-time, and many worked much more than 40 hours each week. On the other hand, many of the mothers were employed only part-time. It may be that parents who are more involved at work (both in terms of the amount of time spent there and in terms of their psychological identity) are less likely to show the type of "compensation" response that I am suggesting. I plan to explore this possibility with the data.

Closing

(OVERHEAD #10) To summarize, the data that I have presented today suggest three different short-term effects of social stress at work on parental behavior. The evidence was consistent with the idea that the fathers in this sample may use social withdrawal to cope with the cognitive and emotional overloads associated with negative social interactions at work. The mothers, on the other hand, appeared to increase their level of responsiveness on high social stress days. I suggested that this might reflect a compensation process whereby the mothers engage in social behaviors intended to repair their mood and recover from the other effects of stressors at work. There was also some evidence for a negative emotion spillover effect among the fathers, but the children's data did not support the fathers' reports. This suggests to me that negative spillover may, at least in part, reflect an effect of distressing social interactions on social perception.

In closing, I'd like to emphasize the importance of social context and group differences

when studying responses to stress, like daily conditions at work. The preliminary results from this study, and past research, suggest the importance of examining the role of variables like parent sex, family structure (ages of children, number of parents in the home), SES, type of job, the daily behavior of other family members (e.g., social support), and stable individual-differences (e.g., Type A behavior and mental health). There are many ways that a parent's behavior at home can be influenced by events that occurred at work, certainly many more than the three outlined here. I believe that a next important step for researchers in this field is, not only to describe the different responses to job stress, but also to begin to identify the conditions that increase the probability of observing one response as opposed to another.

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Events during the
parent's day outside
of the home

Events during the
child's day outside
of the home



Family Reunion
at the end of the day

Overhead #2

HYPOTHESES

Negative Social Interaction at Work ---> Parent Behavior at Home

FATHERS

Social Withdrawal:
Decreased Responsiveness

Negative Emotion Spillover:
Increased Aversive Behavior

MOTHERS

Social Withdrawal:
Decreased Responsiveness

Overhead #3
Sample

Dual-Earner Families

N = 53 fathers and 53 mothers
N = 53 target children (5th or 6th grade)

Single-Earner/Mother Families

N = 28 mothers and 28 target children

Overhead #4

Measures

Negative Social Interactions
(14 items; alpha = .84, .86)

Sample items:

"During interactions with coworkers (supervisors) today I felt
...tense, resentful, annoyed, attacked."

Each item was rated on a 1-4 accuracy scale.

Cronbach's alpha is reported for mothers and fathers separately.

Overhead #5
Measures of Daily Parent Behavior
Parent Responsiveness (Social Withdrawal)

Parent Self-Report^a
(17 items; alpha = .89, .91)

Sample items:

- "I praised my child."
- "We had a lot of fun together."
- "Compared to a typical evening....
- I was (more/less) affectionate with my child."

Child Report^b
(19 items; alpha = .97)

Sample items:

- "My mother praised me."
- "My mother and I had fun together."
- "My mother showed me that she loves me."

Overhead #6
Measures of Daily Parent Behavior
Parent Aversive Behavior

Parent Self-Report^a
(6 items; alpha = .89, .91)

Sample items:

- "I lost my temper with my child."
- "I yelled at my child."
- "I punished my child."

Child Report^b
(10 items; alpha = .97)

Sample items:

- "My father lost his temper with me."
- "My father yelled at me."
- "My father punished me."

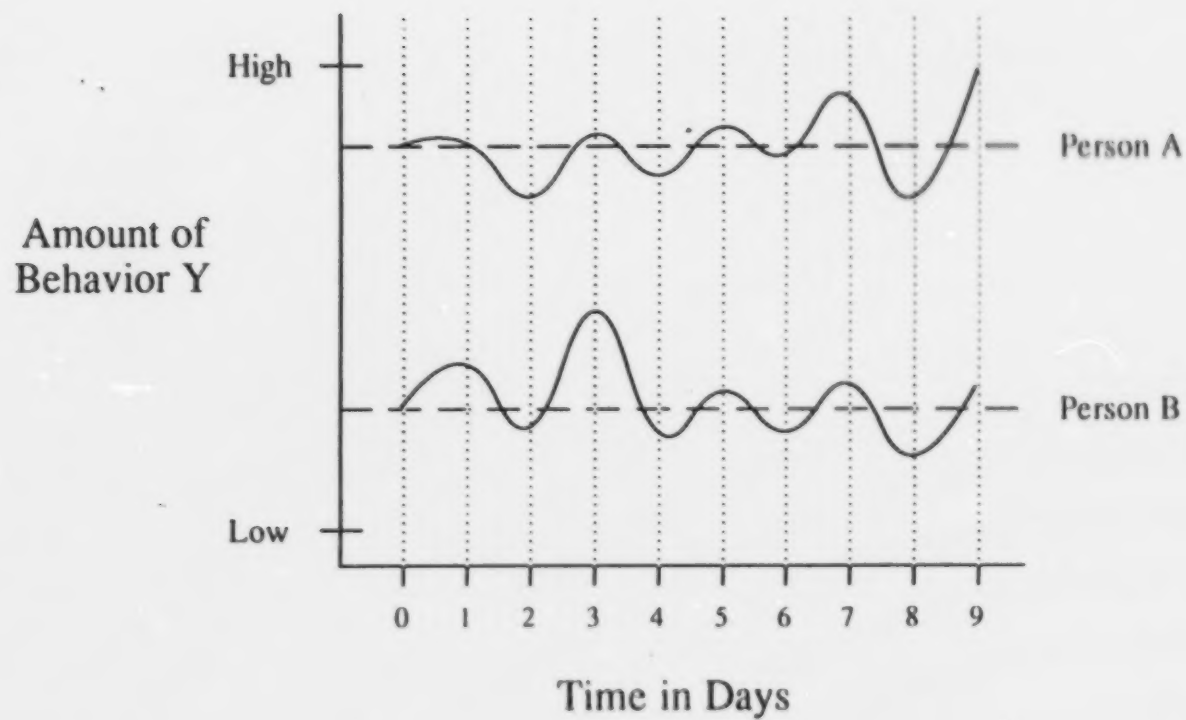
^aItems were rated as true/false or more/less.

Cronbach's alpha is reported for mothers and fathers separately.

^bAll child-report items were rated on a 1-4 accuracy scale.

Half of the children rated father behavior.

Illustration of Intra-Subject Variability Over Time



Overhead #7

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Overhead #8
Results: DUAL-EARNER FATHERS'

Social Withdrawal

Negative Social Interaction at Work ---> Father Responsiveness

Father Self-Reports
beta = -.08 ($p \leq .0001$)

Child Reports
beta = -.47 ($p \leq .001$)

Negative Emotion Spillover

Negative Social Interaction at Work ---> Father Aversive Behavior

Father Self-Reports
beta = +.15 ($p \leq .0001$)

Child Reports
beta = +.03 (ns)

Overhead #9
Results: MOTHERS
Social Withdrawal

Negative Social Interaction at Work ---> Mother Responsiveness

Dual-Earner Mother Self-Reports
beta = +.17 ($p \leq .01$)

Single Mother Self-Reports
beta = +.11 ($p \leq .0001$)

Child Description of Maternal Behavior

Single-Parent Families
beta = +.17 ($p \leq .001$)

Dual-Earner And Single-Parent Families Combined
beta = +.61 ($p \leq .0001$)

Overhead #10

Short-Term Responses
To An Increase In Stressors

Coping with cognitive and emotional overload from social stressors

Social Withdrawal (fathers)

Compensation (mothers)

Negative Emotion Spillover

Negative Social Interactions At Work

---> Negative Mood

---> Aversive Behavior

(---> Perception of Behavior?)